

Have Newspapers Muffed Job of Informing on Vietnam?

By Richard Harwood

SUSAN WELCH, a political scientist at the University of Illinois, produced a document last fall that ought to be an appendix to the Pentagon Papers. It was a study of how three American newspapers prepared themselves and, to some extent, the American people for the military intervention in Vietnam. These newspapers were The Washington Post, The New York Times and The San Francisco Chronicle.

During the 1950s, the study demonstrates, these newspapers—along with the government—helped set in concrete in the American mind the "issues" in Indochina. They ensured, Mrs. Welch wrote, "that the reading public would view the war as a struggle between Communism and the Free World, vital to the preservation of all of Southeast Asia, and perhaps all of Asia; that Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were merely agents of Moscow and Peking whose primary means of gaining support was through terror and force (although occasional reference was made to his nationalistic appeal); and of a gallant ally, France, fighting alongside the United States to preserve 'liberty and justice for all'." They also ensured, her analysis shows, that the public would see Indochina as "an area vital to our interests, that it was under challenge in a clear case of Communist aggression which had to be stopped, and that if the people of Indochina knew the facts they would naturally support the West in any struggle with the Communists."

Finally, these newspapers propagated the view that the "only way out of the crisis which could result in a satisfactory solution for the West was a military victory over the forces of Ho Chi Minh . . . While there was some sentiment expressed against sending United States troops to Indochina, the major criticism which was directed against the administration was not for suggesting this, but rather for not being firm in pursuing a consistent policy." (The Welch study was entitled "The Press and Foreign Policy: The Definition of the Situation," and was delivered at the American Political Science Association convention in Los Angeles last September.)

The Times and The Washington Post continued into the 1960s to accept the basic assumptions of the previous decade insofar as Indochina was concerned. In the case of The Post, it was only after a change in editors in late 1968 that doubts about those assumptions began to be expressed and to be replaced by a new set of assumptions that have become the prevailing wisdom of the 1970s: the assumptions that intervention was a mistake and that Indochina is not vital to U.S. interests.

the words of Mrs. Welch, "a prisoner of its own rhetoric."

We had no contrary wisdom to offer, no alternatives to put forward, little dissent to publicize. Lacking our own staff of correspondents, having no other institutional expertise to draw on, there was no way for The Post to subject the assumptions about Vietnam to the "demands of reality." We were unable, for example, to test the assumption that Ho Chi Minh was "a tool of the 'worldwide Communist conspiracy.' " That is the sort of thing one took on faith, especially since it fit the postwar assumptions of The Post and The Times relative to the Cold War and "collective security." Our ignorance about Ho was further compounded as the years went on by the closed society policies of North Vietnam; correspondents were not allowed into Hanoi.

THERE WERE, in the 1950s, a few protesting voices. The Chicago Tribune, the Welch study shows, opposed U.S. involvement in Vietnam every step of the way. If this country wished to fight communism, The Tribune maintained, let it fight it at home, not in the jungles of Asia. But that kind of thinking in the 1950s was dismissed as "isolationism"; it had no credibility among "in-

perience provided clear evidence of the low tolerance level in this country for "no-win" wars. Nevertheless the American government during the 1950s was making military commitments all around the world, commitments that were reaffirmed by the Kennedy administration.

The press could have explored through public opinion studies the governmental assumption that the country was prepared to make good on those commitments. But that was not done, any more than it is being done today with respect to commitments to such countries as Taiwan and Israel. There is evidence of a great lack of popular support for physical interventions anywhere far from home but the press has shown little interest in it. Albert Cantril and the Gallup organization found in April of this year that only 12 per cent of our people are willing to send troops to either Taiwan or Israel in the event of a "Communist attack."

Newspapers function, as the Welch study indicates, as middlemen in a continuing dialogue between government and the governed and when the dialogue is limited to a single point of view or single set of assumptions it has no more utility than an echo chamber. A polarized dialogue—right versus wrong—is not all that useful, either, because the rhetoric too often obscures the realities.

What newspapers must do is to provide a forum for intellectual diversity of a range

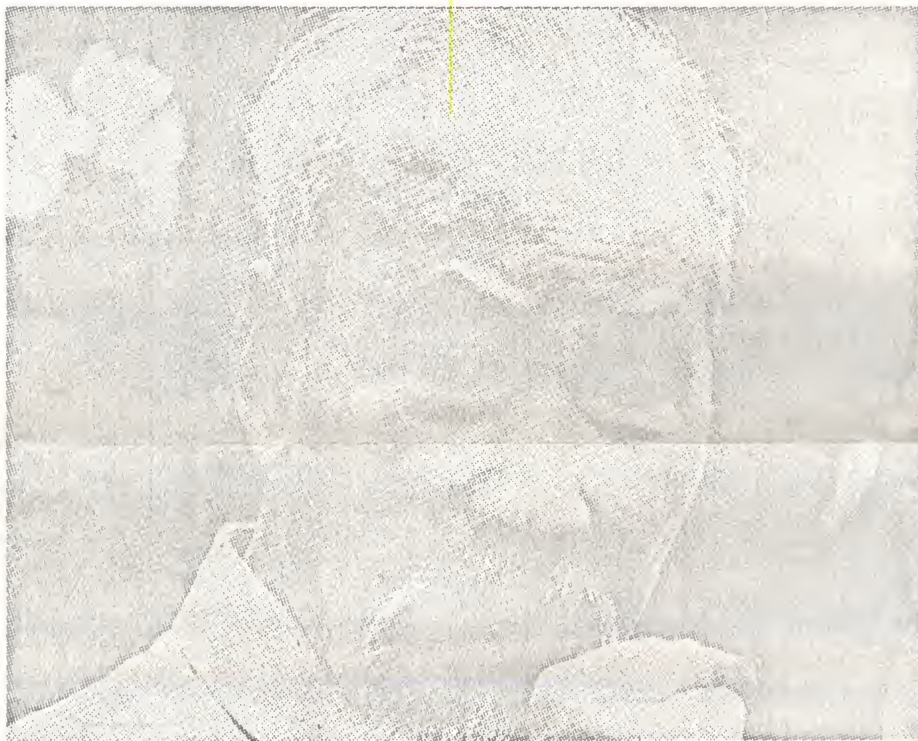


Photo by Black Star

Was Ho Chi Minh a tool of the "worldwide Communist conspiracy?"

IT HAS become almost a childish game these days for journalists and politicians to dig back into the record in search of statements to prove that someone was a "hawk" or a "dove" at some point in time. Frequently the purpose of the game is to gain a debating point, to discredit an opponent or to destroy an argument. Scapegoating and masochism are also involved as in Daniel Ellsberg's famous declaration: "I am a war criminal."

There is none of this, however, in the Welch study. It is a serious effort to examine the processes by which issues are defined and policies are made in a democracy. Newspapers play a role in those processes as middlemen between government and the governed. The manner in which we play that role was the subject of the exercise by Mrs. Welch. She concluded that we didn't play it well.

There was, to begin with, great ignorance about Indochina on the part of the press, Congress and the public. The academic community was only slightly better informed and most of its experts were working for the government.

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OUR newspaper was a case in point. All through the 1950s, while editorial positions were being staked out and attitudes were being formed, The Washington Post had no correspondent in Vietnam or hardly anywhere else for that matter. So we became heavily dependent on the administration for whatever information and assumptions we acquired. Like The Times, we parroted those assumptions and, in effect, helped paint the administration into a corner by making it, in

ternationalists" any more than the dissenting views of John Stennis, Wayne Morse or Ernest Gruening had credibility later on.

The John Birch Society was bitterly opposed in the 1960s to intervention in Vietnam: "In the long run you are going to see the fact that we are at war used increasingly, and ever more brazenly, to enable the Communists in government, in the press, in the pulpit and in every other division of our national life, to label all criticism of their captive administration as treasonous. You will see that administration begin to establish controls over the lives and actions of the American people which will make all the regimentation we have had so far look like a study in free enterprise; and begin suppressing all opposition by the usual Communist police-state methods." That was not a credible viewpoint at the time, although the same rhetoric, substituting "fascist" for "Communist," is popular today on the Left.

The point is that alternative viewpoints about Vietnam—persuasive viewpoints—were not being developed in any effective way by non-government institutions in the 1950s and were not being developed by the press itself. By the time American reporters began discovering Vietnam in the early 1960s, editorial positions were pretty well fixed and governmental policies had a momentum of their own.

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THERE WAS another failing by the press. Newspapers did not examine the American potential for protracted war or systematically examine the reasoning behind the thesis that this country should not get bogged down in a land war in Asia. The Korean ex-

greater than A to B. They must also recognize, as Ben Bagdikian of this newspaper has put it, that they are not merely in the "printing" business; they are in the "information" business. This means that they need to develop the capabilities to acquire and process a far greater range of information than has been the case in the past. And they must have people with the skills to analyze and explain it. All this would cost money. It would alter many of the ancient routines of the trade. It would require new skills in the newsroom. But it would also provide newspapers—and the country—with alternatives to the echo-chamber trap that caught us up in the 1950s and to the dialogue of polarization that followed.

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